

WORDEN, JOHN L.

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UNION OFFICERS

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# Civil War Officers Union

John Worden

Excerpts from newspapers and other sources

From the files of the  
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# Lincoln Lore

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## Lincoln's Promotion of John L. Worden

Rear Admiral John L. Worden is associated in the public mind with only one event in Civil War history: the naval engagement between the *Monitor* and the *Merrimack* — the first great battle of the iron clads. With the rank of lieutenant, this forty-four year old naval officer, in command of the *Monitor*, fought the battle in Hampton Roads on March 9, 1862. On the following day he made the personal acquaintance of President Lincoln and found himself in line for rapid promotions.

The engagement between the iron-clads was a drawn battle; however, the day before the United States suffered a disastrous defeat when the *Merrimack*, mounting ten guns, steamed out of the Navy Yard at Norfolk to Hampton Roads to destroy the wooden ships of the U.S. Navy then lying at anchor there. At anchor off Fortress Monroe lay the frigates *Minnesota*, *Roanoke*, *St. Lawrence* and *Congress*, and the sloop-of-war *Cumberland*. The *Cumberland* was the first ship to be sunk by the *Merrimack*. The *Congress* was the next ship attacked and after one hour she surrendered and was destroyed. The *Roanoke* and *St. Lawrence* attempted to take part in the battle but both ran aground, as did the *Minnesota*; however, the last named vessel was in a position in which she was able to fight. At five o'clock that afternoon the *Merrimack* retired.

Returning the next day (Sunday morning), the *Merrimack* discovered an odd craft lying beside the *Minnesota*. The Confederates knew immediately it was *Ericsson's Battery* which had been named *Monitor*. For more than four hours, from 8 to 12 o'clock, the two iron-clads fought at close range, all the while maneuvering for position, and the *Merrimack* tried unsuccessfully to ram her antagonist. At the close of the battle the *Merrimack* was badly damaged and the *Monitor* was practically unharmed.

The only battle casualty aboard the *Monitor* was Lieutenant Worden. A shell had exploded on the pilot house as Worden was looking through a slit in the turret, and the powder and flame from the shell were driven into his eyes and face by the force of the explosion, rendering him blind and helpless. The resultant confusion caused by the explosion gave the *Merrimack* an opportunity to withdraw in the direction of Norfolk, even though Lieutenant Samuel Dana Greene, the ex-

ecutive officer aboard the *Monitor*, continued the action.

Worden in his blind agony was placed in charge of Lieutenant H. A. Wise, an observer for the Ordnance Department, who was at Hampton Roads with Captain Gustavus V. Fox, the Assistant Secretary of the Navy, to witness the battle. Worden was placed under the care of a surgeon and was taken by steamer to Baltimore, where General John A. Dix provided an ambulance to take Worden to the train where a special coach was furnished for the Washington trip.

When Worden arrived in the Capital, he was taken to the home of Lieutenant Wise and was put to bed. Wise then proceeded to the White House where he found the President in counsel with his Cabinet. In the presence of Lincoln and the Cabinet members, Wise related the events of the naval engagement as he saw it.

"Where is Lieutenant Worden now?" asked the President. "At my house, sir," replied the officer. Thereupon, the President reached for his hat, and a moment later the meeting adjourned. Lincoln said, "I don't know what you gentlemen are going to do but for my part I am going to pay my respects to the young man who fought that battle."

Lincoln went directly to the sick-room where Worden lay, blindfolded and in great pain. Without speaking he reached out his hands and folded them over one of Worden's. Wise told the lieutenant that the President was his visitor. Worden said, "You do me a great honor, Mr. President, by this visit." For a moment Lincoln did not reply. Wise said that tears were in the President's eyes as he looked at Worden's face which was filled with gun powder and was much swollen. Then Lincoln replied, "No

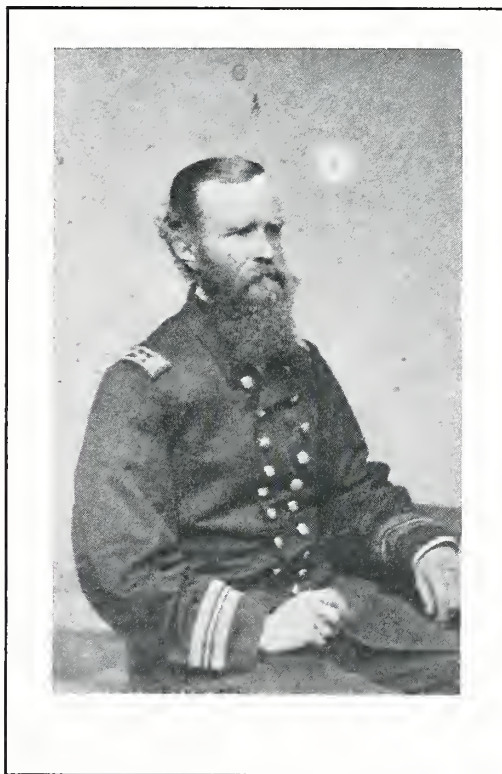
sir, you have done me and your country honor and I shall promote you."

Sometime during this conversation Worden indicated to Lincoln that his vessel might be exposed to attack and capture if it should proceed unattended to Norfolk. Worden's apprehensions caused Lincoln to write Gideon Welles as follows:

Executive Mansion  
March 10, 1862

Hon. Sec. of Navy  
My dear Sir:

I have just seen Lieut. Worden, who says that the "Monitor" could be boarded and captured very easily—



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

John Lorimer Worden  
1818 - 1897



first, after boarding, by wedging the turret, so that it would not turn, and then by pouring water in her & drowning her machinery. He is decidedly of opinion she should not go skylarking up to Norfolk.

Yours truly  
A. Lincoln

Upon receiving this letter Gideon Welles, the same day, telegraphed Captain Fox at Fortress Monroe the following order: "It is directed by the President that the Monitor be not too much exposed, and that in no event shall any attempt be made to proceed with her unattended to Norfolk . . ."

Fox thereupon communicated his reply to Montgomery Blair on March 11th as follows: "... tell the President that the Monitor shall take no risk excepting with the Merrimack."

At the suggestion of Lincoln, Secretary Welles sent to Worden a letter of thanks, dated March 15, 1862 as follows:

Navy Department  
March 15, 1862

Sir

The naval action which took place on the 10th instant, between the Monitor and the Merrimack at Hampton Roads, when your vessel with two guns engaged a powerful armored steamer, of at least eight guns, and after a four hour conflict repelled her formidable antagonist, has excited general admiration and received the applause of the whole country.

The President directs me, while earnestly and deeply sympathising with you in the injuries which you have sustained, but which it is believed are but temporary, to thank you and your command for the heroism you have displayed and the great service you have rendered.

The action of the 10th and the performance, power and capabilities of the Monitor must effect a radical change in naval warfare.

Flag Officer Goldsborough, in your absence, will be furnished by the Department with a copy of this letter of thanks, and instructed to cause it be read to the officers and crew of the Monitor.

I am respect  
yr. obt. servant  
Gideon Welles

Lieut John L. Worden

U. S. Navy  
Comdg U. S. steamer Monitor  
Washington, D.C.

This letter is remarkable for several reasons; namely, the statement: "that the battle must effect a radical change in naval warfare . . .," which indicates that the lesson of the conflict had been more speedily assimilated than sometimes happens in high official quarters (yet the United States remained upon a wooden basis until 1883). Another remarkable thing about this official letter is the care used to avoid characterizing the action as a victory — a point upon which controversy has raged ever since. The most that was ventured by Secretary Welles was that the *Monitor* "repelled her formidable antagonist." Welles did spell the name of the Confederate vessel correctly. In all of the official correspondence the vessel is referred to as the *Merrimack*.

Oddly enough, the Secretary of the Navy made a grievous error in his letter in stating that the battle occurred on March 10th when the correct date was March 9th.

The greatest honor, however, to come to Worden for his heroism was a Congressional Vote of Thanks. Inscribed on parchment and dated July 11, 1862, the original document now in the files of Lincoln Memorial University at Harrogate, Tennessee, is as follows:

Thirty Seventh Congress of the United States  
of America At the Second Session  
Begun and held at the City of Washington,  
the Second day of December,  
one thousand eight hundred and sixty one  
A Resolution

expressive of the thanks of Congress to Lieutenant J. L. Worden of the U. S. Navy and to the officers and men under his command in the Monitor, Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled.

That the thanks of Congress and of the American people are due, and are hereby tendered to Lieutenant J. L. Worden of the United States Navy, and to the officers and men of the iron clad gunboat Monitor, under his Command, for the skill and gallantry exhibited by them in the late remarkable battle between the Monitor and the rebel iron clad steamer Merrimack.

Sec. 2. Be it further resolved, That the President of the United States be requested to cause this resolution to be communicated to Lieutenant Worden, and through him to the officers and men under his command.

Schuyler Colfax  
Speaker of the House  
of Representatives  
Dan C. Clark  
President pro tem of the Senate  
Abraham Lincoln

Approved July 11, 1862.

True to Lincoln's promise, Lieutenant Worden was promoted to the grade of commander dating from July 12, 1862, and on February 3, 1863 he was promoted to the rank of captain and was awarded a second Congressional Vote of Thanks. His appointment was confirmed on February 21st.

Lincoln's continuing interest in the naval career of Worden is attested by the following message to the Senate:

February 4, 1863

To the Senate of the United States

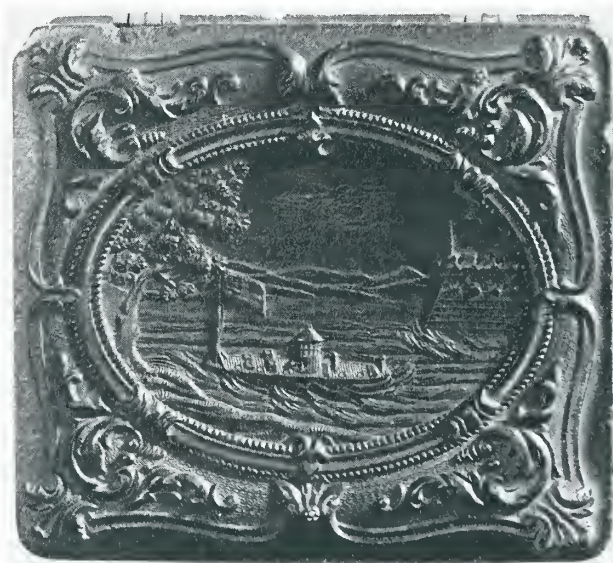
In pursuance of the joint resolution of Congress approved 3 February, 1863, tendering its thanks to Commander John L. Worden, U. S. Navy, I nominate that officer to be a captain in the Navy, on the active list, from the 3rd February, 1863.

It may be proper to state that the number of captains authorized by the 2nd section of the act of 16 July, 1862, is now full, but presuming that the meaning of the 9th section of the same act is that the officer receiving the vote of thanks shall immediately be advanced one grade, I have made the nomination.

Washington, D.C. February 4, 1863 Abraham Lincoln

As is true of so many heroes, Worden's distinguished career as a naval officer was never again so glamorous as the stirring engagement at Hampton Roads. Appointed commodore on June 5, 1868 and rear admiral on November 29, 1872, the remainder of his long life was that of the typical and successful navy officer.

Worden was, however, unique in that he had received two Congressional votes of thanks which according to



From the Collection of the Editor

Gutta-percha daguerreotype case depicting the sea battle between the Monitor and the Merrimack.



law gave him special privileges in relation to an extended period of service, a law entitling Worden to fifty-five years of active service. However, he retired with the highest sea-pay of his grade, at his own request, on December 23, 1886.

Worden was a brave and competent officer, but not necessarily a brilliant one. Lady Luck (or President Lincoln) seemed to have been with him in the way of special assignments and promotions. Perhaps his assignment of the command of the *Monitor* came to him because the older officers of the Navy had no desire to command the "cheese box on a raft" or "a tin can on a shingle" which started the forty-four year old lieutenant on the road to fame. Little did old "wooden wall" officers realize that a reputation could be built on the half-submerged deck of that "absurd monstrosity" of John Ericsson's.

### The Wide Awakes And Their Torch Light Parades

To promote the Presidential candidacy of Abraham Lincoln during the political campaign of 1860 there were developed marching organizations called the Wide Awakes. The members marched at night carrying flaming torches, colored lanterns, banners, flags and transparencies much the same way as floats are used today. Such parades served as entertainment in the communities, large or small, when other types of diversion were unknown. Along the route of the parade streamers were hung across the streets and the buildings, and everyone and everything was gayly decorated. These celebrations, held largely in the North, did much to advertise the candidate, in addition to entertaining the spectator.

The first Wide Awake Club was organized in Hartford, Connecticut on Saturday, March 3, 1860 when a group of thirty-six young men met in a club room over Buck's Drug Store on Main Street, one door north of the Phoenix Bank. They adopted a Constitution, and each member was to provide at his own expense "a glazed cap and cape," and to pay a fee of seventy-five cents which would allow him the use of a campaign torch. J. Doyle De Witt, in his 15 page pamphlet "Lincoln In Hartford" has provided a detailed account of the origin and purpose of the Wide Awakes.

The first officers of the Hartford Wide Awakes were James S. Chalker, Captain; H. T. Sperry, 1st Aid and Corresponding Secretary; and C. V. R. Pond, Recording Secretary and Captain's Aid. The objective of the newly formed organization proved popular and within a few weeks the membership was increased to "several hundred" and on July 27, over "two thousand" Wide Awakes from Hartford and from other cities, some as far away as Newark, marched in the streets of Hartford in a torchlight parade. Meanwhile, Republican organizations all over the country adopted the name "Wide Awakes" and a potent political force was created almost spontaneously.

The campaign torches burned a coal-oil or low grade kerosene, and as they continually dripped when in use, the marchers wore oil cloth capes to protect their clothing. These capes also served as rain capes during inclement weather. At first these capes were nondescript, but eventually they became colorful uniforms. Then, too, enterprising manufacturers made available to the marchers many types of torches with varying descriptions in newspaper advertisement of the merits of their products. However, many of the torches were home-made.

At times, some of the groups taking part in the torchlight processions were hired marchers who were paid as much as \$2.00 per person for one parade, and they were not necessarily loyal to any political party. Other paraders were sometimes highly trained and could execute a manual of arms with their rifle torches, similar to military marching groups. These parades would often last two or three hours. The custom of using torchlight groups in political parades prevailed until the late 19th century.

In the 1860 campaign, the marchers did more than march; they sang campaign songs and shouted political slogans. A popular number often sung during a parade was the "Wide Awake Rallying Song":

### Wide Awake Rallying Song Tune—"Nelly Bly."

Wide awake! wide awake! this is no time for sleep,  
Let every friend of Freedom his weary vigil keep;  
The foe is on his march again, his council fires aglow,  
Then rally now, my gallant boys, to battle with the foe.

Chorus—Wide awake! wide awake!  
Let us our torches take,  
And show the foes of Freedom, boys,  
That we are wide awake.

Wide awake! wide awake! there's no such word as fail,  
The omens of our triumph, boys, are borne on every gale;  
From East to West, through all the land where Freedom  
yet holds sway,

The shouts of Freedom's conquering hosts still cheer us  
on our way.

Chorus—Wide awake! wide awake! etc.  
Wide awake! wide awake! the foe is on his way,  
There is no time for slumber, if we would win the day;  
Our cause is just, our hearts are firm, and fixed on truth  
and right,

If we keep wide awake, boys, we'll put our foes to flight.

Chorus—Wide awake! wide awake! etc.  
Wide awake! wide awake! the stars with loving light  
Look down upon our gallant band who battle for the right;  
We bear no weapons in our hands, our motto's "Love to  
man,"

And Freedom, peace, and happiness, still follow in our  
van.

Chorus—Wide awake! wide awake! etc.

A "Grand Procession of Wide Awakes" at New York



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

This eagle torch (recently acquired by the Lincoln Library-Museum) is believed to have been used in the 1860 Presidential campaign by the Republican Wide Awakes. The torch burned a low grade of coal oil and was supported on a pole by loops under each wing, with wick openings on top of each wing. The wick openings on this torch have been converted from single burners to double burners. Examples of this type of torch are found in the Detroit Historical Society and in the J. Doyle DeWitt Collection of Hartford, Conn. See Political Campaign Torches by Herbert R. Collins, Museum of History and Technology, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.







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